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WHAT IF I DO NOT MATCH? SCRAMBLING FOR A SPOT AND GOING OUTSIDE THE MATCH

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Abstract—Matching into emergency medicine (EM) is getting progressively more competitive. Applicants must therefore prepare for the possibility of not matching and, accordingly, be ready to participate in the Supplemental Offer and Acceptance Program (SOAP). In this article, we elaborate on the SOAP and the options for applicants who fail to match during Match Week. Alternative courses of action include applying for a preliminary year, matching into a categorical residency program, or aiming to secure EM spots outside the Match through the Council of Emergency Medicine Residency Directors, Society for Academic Emergency Medicine, and American Association of Medical Colleges. © 2019 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords—emergency medicine; match; SOAP; scramble; medical student; residency

INTRODUCTION

What if I do not match? Match results typically become available to schools, programs, and applicants via the Internet during a 5-day period in March known as Match Week. Applicants obtain Match information either through e-mail notification or by logging on to the National Resident Matching Program (NRMP) website. Emergency

medicine (EM) remains very competitive and very few positions are left unfilled in the Match. In fact, in 2018, a 60% increase in the offered postgraduate (PGY)1 positions was witnessed: 2278 positions as compared to the 1668 positions in 2012. Yet, none of the positions in 2012 and only 13 positions in 2018 (0.6%) were left unfilled (1,2).

DISCUSSION

The inevitable fact of the Match is that some students will not secure a spot in a residency. All students should therefore develop a backup plan. Students who fail to match usually have deficiencies in 1 or more of the following: U.S. Medical Licensing Examination scores, professionalism, academics, suitability among applicants, interviewing or interpersonal skills, failure to apply to and interview with a sufficient number of programs, and arranging a backup plan (3).

After an unsuccessful match, applicants can still secure a position through 1 of 3 possible routes. The first possibility is participating in the Supplemental Offer and Acceptance Program (SOAP). Another option is reapplying to the next match while trying to boost their

Table 1. Numbers of Eligible Applicants, Positions Accepted, and Participants Accepting Positions for the 2018 Supplemental Offer and Acceptance Program (2)

Applicant Type	Eligible Applicants, n	Positions Accepted, n (%)	Participants Accepting Positions, n
U.S. allopathic seniors	2146	581 (27)	580
U.S. osteopathic seniors	1142	211 (18.5)	211
International medical graduates	8901	213 (2.4)	212

application during the extra year. Finally, applicants can also try acquiring a position outside the SOAP (4).

What Is SOAP?

Beginning with the 2012 Main Residency Match, applicants who did not match have the opportunity to secure an unfilled position in a residency program by participating in the SOAP, which replaced the old “Scramble.”

SOAP is the process by which unmatched applicants seek to obtain one of the unfilled positions from the Match. SOAP has been very competitive. In 2018, 13,176 applicants from all specialties were SOAP-eligible. Of those, only 1105 matched successfully (in all specialties). Table 1 summarizes the numbers of eligible applicants, positions accepted, and participants accepting positions for U.S. allopathic and osteopathic applicants, as well as international medical graduates for the 2018 SOAP (1). For emergency medicine in particular, 7 programs participated in SOAP, offering 10 positions. Eight positions in 6 of those programs were filled (1).

What Do I Do to Participate in SOAP?

Applicants learn whether—but not where—they matched at noon Eastern Time (ET) on Monday of Match Week. Also at noon, the NRMP releases the List of Unfilled Programs. Beginning at noon on Monday and throughout Match Week, applicants can send applications to the unfilled programs using the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS). Only applicants who registered for the Match and who are certified by the NRMP to participate in SOAP will have access to and be able to apply to NRMP unfilled programs using ERAS. All other types of contact between programs and applicants (or their designees) participating in SOAP are prohibited. Therefore, faxing, calling, e-mailing, or having another individual contact programs on the applicant's behalf is not allowed. The medical school Student Affairs Office can assist unmatched students, but also cannot contact programs on the student's behalf.

Program directors (PDs) will review the applications they receive and may contact the applicants they are interested in. No offers are allowed during this “time out” period.

At noon on Tuesday of Match Week, PDs can begin creating preference lists of applicants using the NRMP

website. The preference lists must be finalized by 11:30 AM ET on Wednesday.

At noon ET on Wednesday, the NRMP will use the programs' preference lists to extend offers to unmatched applicants, who must accept or reject the offers within 2 h. If an applicant allows an offer to expire or rejects an offer, no further offers will be made to that applicant by the same program. After each round of offers, filled positions will be deleted from the dynamic list of unfilled positions and programs can add applicants to their preference lists. Successive offer rounds will occur on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday of Match Week. Acceptance of a position is completed via “electronic handshake” and is considered a binding agreement. With that being said, it is important to note that it is extremely difficult to SOAP into an unfilled EM position, and an applicant to EM residencies should not plan on utilizing the SOAP as a substitute for an appropriately thorough application and interviewing process (5).

Given the very few positions in EM residencies available in the SOAP, applicants to EM who are going through the SOAP may consider simultaneously applying for another specialty, such as family medicine, internal medicine, or a preliminary year through the SOAP.

Training in a preliminary internal medicine, preliminary surgery, preliminary obstetrics and gynecology, or a transitional-year program provides valuable clinical experience and also prepares unmatched applicants to start a PGY2-3-4 EM program if a spot becomes available. Transitional-year programs provide a well-rounded experience and include elective time during which the trainee could do an EM rotation and secure a new Standardized Letter of Evaluation (SLOE) to help their application. According to the Council of Emergency Medicine Residency Directors (CORD)-EM Student Advising Task Force, EM PDs did not reach consensus on what is a better option for unmatched students: doing a preliminary year or getting into a categorical program, particularly in internal medicine (IM) or family medicine. Applicants who choose to get into a categorical program have the advantage of having a secured training position should a reapplication to EM be unsuccessful. However, if they do match successfully, they will have to break their contract. On the other hand, if applicants choose to do a preliminary year, they are faced with the decision of which kind of preliminary training is the best. The most

common options are IM or surgery; however, PDs did not reach an agreement in that concern (5).

As of 2011, Match Day ceremonies are held on Friday of Match Week.

What if I Cannot Get a Residency Position at the End of the Match?

Hundreds of EM applicants will not be able to secure an EM residency position through either the regular Match or SOAP. Unmatched applicants should reassess the strength of their applications, aptitudes, career choice, and chances of a future match in EM before reapplying. Unmatched applicants should discuss plans with their medical school advisor or mentor and discuss extending their medical education; pursuing additional graduate school in another discipline, such as public health or business administration; or pursuing research in order to strengthen their application.

Students reapplying to EM after not having secured a position must seriously consider applying to another specialty as a backup. A small percentage of students are able to successfully secure an EM position when reapplying, but many will not. Students should not put themselves in a position of going unmatched 2 years in a row. The longer one goes unmatched, the less likely they are to successfully obtain a position in EM.

Additionally, before reapplying, applicants should review and reevaluate their application with the help of a trustworthy advisor. Any “red flags” in either their application or personal statement should be addressed. Moreover, applicants should try securing a new SLOE, either through an EM rotation if they are in a training program or just as a volunteer if they are in graduate school or a research year, preferably in the summer or early fall (5).

Other Ways to Find Emergency Medicine Spots “Outside the Match”

If EM is still a serious consideration, a few more options exist. Some positions may not be filled during Match Week and others become available throughout the academic year for a variety of reasons. These positions are usually advertised first on the CORD private electronic list service. The Society for Academic Emergency Medicine “Residency Vacancy” site (at <http://www.saem.org/>) and CORD website also list available positions. The American Association of Medical Colleges “Find a Resident” site (<http://aamc.org/findaresident>) helps to connect programs and applicants (6,7). Unmatched applicants should maintain a good relationship with a PD or a member of CORD to help stay informed when openings are posted.

Many openings posted outside of the Main Residency Match are for positions that become available due to the unexpected loss of a resident or an increase in residency size.

These programs are typically seeking residents with equivalent training who want to transfer for one reason or another. Residents who transfer into an EM program must fulfill all requirements of the American Board of Emergency Medicine (ABEM) to be eligible to sit for board certification examinations. Applicants and programs should refer to the ABEM Policy for Training and Credit in Other Specialties for clarification about transfer of credits (8). There is no guarantee that credit for prior training will be granted.

CONCLUSIONS

Applicants to residency programs in EM should prepare for the possibility of not matching and prepare to participate in SOAP well in advance of Match Week. Applicants who remain unmatched after Match Week should seek advice from their Student Affairs Office, advisor, or mentor.

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